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AUTHOR Izzo, John
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ABSTRACT

Japanese university English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) students have problems structuring English sentences, especially complex compound sentences. This study reviewed undergraduate EFL student writings from three Japanese universities to identify common sentence structure aberrations. Four types of sentence structure aberrations were examined: fused sentences; run-on sentences; sentence fragments; and the use of coordinating conjunctions to start simple sentences. The goal of the study was to identify specific words associated with these sentence aberrations. The review revealed that the most common mistakes for the study group involved the use of the subordinating conjunctions "and" and "but" to start simple sentences rather than to join independent clauses. The use or omission of these words in other cases resulted in run-on or fused sentences. The second most common error was sentence fragments associated with the specific "because" clauses and "for example" lists. It is concluded that Japanese university level EFL writers in general need more instruction and writing assignments that involve the use of the coordinating conjunctions "and" and "but," the subordinating conjunction "because," and the introductory phrase "for example." (Contains 15 references.) (KFT)

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ED 442 290

Sentence Structure Aberrations in English Writings of Japanese University Students

John Izzo

Abstract

Japanese university EFL students have problems structuring English sentences, especially complex and compound sentences. This study involves the review of undergraduate EFL student writings from three Japanese universities to identify common sentence structure aberrations. The review looks at four type of sentence structure aberrations: fused sentences, run-on sentences, sentence fragments, and the use of coordinating conjunctions to start simple sentences. The goal of this study is to identify specific words associated with these sentence aberrations.

Introduction

While conducting error analysis of writings from three Japanese universities, it was noted that two types of sentence structure aberrations were fairly common. These aberrations were sentence fragmentation and the use of coordinating conjunctions *and* and *but* to start simple sentences. Since similar observations had previously been made during evaluation of student writings at the University of Aizu, a closer review of these and similar sentence structuring problem areas was considered to be appropriate.

Obviously, other sentence aberrations such as word order and extraneous or missing words are more common in the writings of university level EFL students.(Kroll, 1990) However, most common errors of Japanese EFL writers likely result from grammatical and structural differences between English and their native language.(Webb, 1991) In addition, most word and phrase level errors in English writings made by EFL writers generally do not completely destroy or significantly alter the meaning or total structure of a sentence.

On the other hand, a sentence fragment is only a part of a sentence that is set off as if it is a complete sentence.(Fowler, 1992; Gorrell, 1994) Since a fragment is not a complete sentence, it does not present a complete, comprehensive thought. It is a group of words missing some aspect(s) that would provide readers with a clear, understandable message. Often, sentence fragments reflect incomplete or confused thinking on the part of the writer.(Brusaw, 1993)

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FL 026 296

Moreover, although some grammarians contend that *and* and *but* can be used as *conjuncts*, especially in informal writings (Close, 1975), this view is generally restricted by the caveat that it should done only for effect.(Davidson, 1996) The great majority of writing texts stipulate that coordinating conjunctions are used to join structural units that are grammatically equal and that the term *conjuncts* refers to conjunctive adverbs.(Frank, 1993) Therefore, using *and* and *but* to start simple sentences more frequently than for joining independent clauses to construct compound sentences is a very poor, if not unacceptable, practice.

With these points in mind, the writings of EFL students from the three Japanese universities were reviewed for fused sentences, run-on sentences, sentence fragments, and the use of the coordinating conjunctions to start simple sentences instead of joining independent clauses. The data collected was then analyzed to determine if any noteworthy observations could be made. The collected data and results of this study are presented in the following sections.

Writings Reviewed

In this study, the in-class writings of 172 EFL students from three Japanese universities were reviewed. Eighty-eight of these in-class writings were 30-minute writings, sixty were 60-90 minute writings, and twenty-four were writings with no time limit. The topics of these writings (Table 1) provided the students with the opportunity to select and write about familiar subjects that appear to be appropriate for their English skill level.

University	Choice of Topics
1 and 2 (30 Min)	The Importance of a University Education
	My Plans for a Working Career
	The Most Important Advancement This Century
	The Most Important Event in My Life
2 (Unlimited)	What I Learned from My Parents
	What I Will Be Doing in 10 Years
3 (60-90 Min)	A Great Place to Visit
	My Best Friend

Table 1: Writing topics

Data Acquisition

During review of the writings in this study, data on sentence fragments, fused and run-on sentences, and the use of coordinating conjunctions to form compound sentences or to start simple sentences was accumulated. This data is summarized in Table 2. Since data on sentence length and number of words per writing was not considered relevant to this study, it was omitted from the table due to lack of space. However, several points that should be of interest to the readers are noted here. First, although the length of the writings increased with the time allotted, the percentage of increase was a relatively small fraction of the percentage of increase in time allotted for the writings. 30-minute writings averaged 9.4 sentences with a total of 117.6 words (12.5 words per sentence). Where as, 60-90 minute writings averaged 10.8, 128.9, and 12.0 respectively, and unlimited time writings averaged 13.2, 177.8, and 13.5. The cumulative averages noted for 172 writings were 11.1 sentences, 135.7 words, and 12.2 words per sentence.

Univ.	Writings	Sentences	Frags	Run-On & fused sentences	And - But simple sentences	and - but compound sentences
1 (30 Min)	50	460	14	5	51	18
2 (30 Min)	38	367	8	2	28	19
2 (Unlimited)	24	316	6	6	23	35
3 (60-90 Min)	60	767	20	5	31	36
Totals	**172**	**1,910**	**48**	**18**	**133**	**108**

Table 2: Writing structure and aberration data.

Data Analysis

The three most common sentence aberrations noted were the overuse of coordinating conjunctions (specifically *and* and *but*) to start sentences, sentence fragments, and run-on sentences. Of these three types of aberrations, run-on sentences were noted the least number of times. Only 13 run-on sentences were noted in the 172 writings which contained a total of 1,910 sentences. Compared to the 48 fragments and the 133 simple sentences starting with *and* or *but*, the 13 run-on sentences (defined in this study as three or more independent clauses arbitrarily joined together) and five fused sentences (defined in this study as two independent clauses not separated by a proper punctuation mark and/or not joined by a required coordinating conjunction) were considered to be insignificant. However, several observations pertaining to run-on sentences deserve mentioning.

First, it was noted that 6 of the 13 run-on sentences (46%) were in the writings of 24 students (14% of the total students) who had unlimited time to complete their writings. These students, on the average, produced only moderately longer writings than the students allotted only 30-minutes. However, they produced 32% of the compound sentences noted in all writings. From the data in the study, it seems logical and likely that as allotted time increases students tend to switch a portion of their efforts from word production to sentence structure improvement. In addition, it can also be contended that as an EFL writer starts to use compound sentences there is likely to be a period when run-on sentences become a problem. Lester King (1991) writes that "Young children often tend to string their thoughts together with a succession of *ands*, thus creating a single interminable sentence whose separate components have lost touch with each other." EFL writers must necessarily progress through the same skill levels as young children and will likely experience similar writing problems. Although these matters deserve more attention, they can not be addressed in this limited study.

On the other hand, sentence fragments were noted 48 times in the writings reviewed and deserve more attention than given to run-on sentences. Of the 48 fragments noted, 22 were sentence fragments involving dependent clauses introduced by the subordinating conjunction *because*, 18 were lists introduced by *for example*, and eight were various other types of fragments. (See Table 3.) Subordinate clauses introduced by *because* were fragmented from their associated independent clauses 33% of the time. This is similar to results obtained in a previous study conducted at the University of Aizu in 1995. In that study, dependent clauses with the subordinating conjunction *because* were fragmented from their associated dependent clauses on 10 of 24 occurrences, or 42% of the *because* usage.(Izzo, 1995)

In addition, a fragmented list separated from an independent clause that discussed a topic which was to be followed by a list of examples was noted 18 times with the words *for example*. A list introduced by *for example* was fragmented from its associated sentence 30% of the time. The number of sentence fragments involving the subordinating conjunction *because* and the fragmented lists introduced by *for example* may not appear to be high when compared to the total number of sentences and words in this study. However, the number of sentence fragments compared to the number of times the words *because* and *for example* were used is excessive. Therefore, it is contended that these specific fragmentation problems need to be addressed in the EFL classroom.

Univ.	Sentences including a because clause	Because frags	Sentences including for example	For example frags	Other frags
1 (30 Min)	21	11	7	2	1
2 (30 Min)	14	4	2	1	3
2 (Unlimited)	12	3	2	1	2
3 (60-90 Min)	20	4	50	14	2
Totals	**67**	**22**	**61**	**18**	**8**

Table 3: Sentence fragmentation data.

It is interesting to note that the most predominant sentence aberration identified in this study was the use of the coordinating conjunctions *and* and *but* to start simple sentences. These conjunction were used 241 times with independent clauses that could have been appropriately joined with other independent clauses as compound sentences. In 133 writings (55% of the occurrences in question), the student selected to use *and* or *but* to start a simple sentence rather than form a compound sentence.

Although the use of *and* and *but* to start simple sentences rather than to form compound sentences seems to be increasing, these two words are coordinating conjunctions and should be appropriately used to join two or more units that are grammatically alike.(Bailey, 1995; Hacker, 1992; Heffernan, 1994; Pfeiffer, 1998) M. Young (1989) writes that "*And* and *but* are conjunctions; in principle, they should be used, for example, to join two independent clauses." Moreover, Fowler and Aaron (1992) contend that "The word *and* is a **coordinating conjunction**. Like prepositions and subordination conjunctions, coordination conjunctions are few and do not change form." In addition, Fowler and Aaron go further and stipulate that

> The coordinating conjunctions *and*, *but*, *nor*, and *or* always connect words or groups of the same kind - that is, two or more nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, phrases, subordinate clauses, or main clauses.

It should be further noted that the great majority of text and reference books reviewed support the position that *and* and *but* are coordinating conjunctions and should be used, except for special effect, to join grammatical units of the same level such as two main (independent) clauses.

Conclusions

A review of the writings and evaluation of the data collected revealed that the most common sentence aberration for the study group involved the use of the subordinating conjunctions *and* and *but* to start simple sentences rather than to join independent clauses. In addition, the use or omission of these words in other cases resulted in run-on or fused sentences. The second most common type of sentence aberration was sentence fragments associated with the specific *because* clauses and *for example* lists. Based upon the results of the writing review, it is concluded that Japanese university level EFL writers in general need more instruction and writing assignments that involve the use of the coordinating conjunctions *and* and *but*, the subordinating conjunction *because*, and the introductory phrase *for example*.

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